# MARXISM AND MODERN IDEALISM

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*'The first requisite for philosophizing is a free and fearless mind.'*

KARL MARX

# FOREWORD

THIS series of booklets was begun in 1943, the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Marx, as a tribute to his memory by British Marxists. It does not aim at a complete exposition of Marxism, but offers from time to time a Marxist commentary on contemporary problems.

The present essay seeks to expose the fallacies of modern idealism. It could not be more timely. The idealist philosophy prevalent in Britain is remote from the life and problems of the people. The efforts of our philosophers to break down their isolation are irresolute, ineffective and doomed to perpetual failure. The failure is in the philosophy itself. It has not rid its own exponents of scepticism, dilettantism, pedantry and obscurantism. There is grave danger in this situation. For a progressive people philosophy is a necessary instrument of action. A correct outlook on the world of nature and of man is not merely a luxury of contemplation. It is as necessary for a man's public as for his private life. It is part of the equipment of the citizen as well as of the man.

Dr. Lewis is well qualified to serve as a guide to the pressing problems of the day. He is already known as an authority on dialectical materialism. He will be found an expert at exposing the errors of idealism which cripple the modern mind. His essay will stimulate and assist progressive thinkers to understand the rôle of philosophy in changing the conditions of life.

B.F.

# MARXISM AND MODERN IDEALISM

## THE FUNCTION OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE MODERN WORLD

### *I. Does it Matter what a Man Believes?*

PHILOSOPHY has been supposed to be a purely academic pursuit of no possible interest to the man of action, the speculative activity of curious minds with nothing better to do. A distinguished scientist says, 'Philosophy may be described as argument about things of which we are ignorant.' Its subject matter is supposed by many to be that which lies beyond everyday experience and is therefore in its very nature either unknowable or non-existent.

Others regard philosophy as the pursuit of pure truth by pure mind, an activity of great, indeed, of the highest importance, but on a different and loftier plane than everyday life, which is concerned with material affairs. Thus Dr. Tudor Jones, discussing contemporary German philosophy in the year 1935, says: 'In spite of the chaos that now exists in Germany in the political, social and religious life, there are still men who have not bowed the knee to Baal, but have proceeded with their philosophical thoughts *as if nothing had happened*'. (*Our italics*). An activity so utterly remote from the problems and demands of real life might well be considered to be futile, and quite beyond the interest of ordinary folk.

But as a matter of fact the man in the street has more philosophical notions in his head than he knows and they affect both his thinking and his actions. It has been well said that 'we have no choice whether we shall form philosophies for ourselves, only the choice whether we shall do so consciously and in accord with some intelligible principle or unconsciously and at random.' The man who is contemptuous of philosophy may be merely a man with an *unexamined* philosophy, whose assumptions are uncritically held and many of whose judgments are prejudices. 'The unexamined life', said Socrates, 'is not worth living', and an unexamined philosophy may prove to be equally unsatisfactory.

A moment's reflection reveals the extent to which modern thinking is saturated with unexamined and usually false philosophical notions. It is not difficult to trace their origin back to traditional modes of thought which were the consciously held and taught philosophies of yesterday or to the writers, journalists, broadcasters, lecturers, preachers and teachers of our own day, some of them philosophers, others popularizers of other men's philosophies, while the rest reflect, in many cases more than they realize, the current philosophies of the time. Eventually discussion and conversation spread these ideas more widely still until the man in the railway train is heard declaring that science no longer believes in matter, the wife by the fireside argues that instinct is more to be trusted than reason, and the Brains Trust, despite the protests of Prof. J. D. Bernal, informs a credulous world that there is a lot to be said for spooks.

At first glance these common beliefs may seem to be quite unimportant, but their social significance is greater than appears. As Bernal pointed out on the occasion mentioned above, it is significant that an immense increase in superstition characterized the decline of ancient Rome and now accompanies the disintegration of our own civilization. The cult of unreason has been one of the diseases of the fascist mind in Germany and Italy and reflects a deliberate turning back to barbarism, the repudiation of the rational and scientific approach to the world. The renewed belief in mentalism, the theory that mind is the fundamental stuff of the universe and that matter is secondary or even unreal, is a view which crops up as the philosophical background of many reactionary attitudes and much social pessimism.

Now all these apparently trivial and certainly loosely held views really stem from philosophical positions of far greater importance and complexity, from *systems* of philosophy, which merit careful enquiry. Moreover they will mostly be found, on examination, to be forms of what is known as Idealism, or to be closely allied to and dependent upon idealist views. It is therefore important that we should clearly understand exactly what is meant by idealism. Philosophically it is not used in any of the popular senses either to describe an outlook on life which is blind to facts as they are, or a determination to think the best of one's fellows, or a life ruled by ideals. The philosophical doctrine is a theory of reality in terms of 'ideas'. The matter has been clearly put by Engels: 'The great

basic question of all philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being . . . The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature . . . comprised the camp of idealism. The others who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism.[1]

A modern philosopher defines it as the view that 'mind alone is real and material bodies are in some sense to be regarded as states of, or elements in, consciousness.'[2]

The fundamental principle is that matter is not the final reality, so that the actual world of nature tends to appear trivial and unimportant, or at any rate derivative and secondary. Many idealists believe that 'Reality' lies beyond the material world, as a rational and perfect system to be contrasted with the irrationality and imperfectness of the world as experienced. Idealists also believe that mind or spirit is the creative force in the world. Not only did Spirit precede and create the material world, but in life and history men lay hold of ideas and ideals, which are right and true in themselves, and proceed to apply them to the world, making or re-making the world according to these principles.

We shall shortly see what forms this philosophy takes in our time and what significance it has for a world passing through one of its great periods of transformation.

Marxism is itself a philosophy and its criticism of idealism is of course philosophical. It does not adopt the merely philistine point of view which brushes philosophy aside as 'argument about things of which we are ignorant', or futile speculation, nor does it adopt a position of naïve realism or common sense, the attitude of Dr. Johnson who when asked how he proposed to refute idealism said, striking his foot against a great stone, 'I refute it thus'. Both Marx and Engels were trained philosophers whose own position was a development rather than a wholesale repudiation of current philosophy. Engels said 'Those who abuse philosophy most are slaves to precisely the worst vulgarized relics of the worst philosophers.' Elsewhere he spoke of the importance of 'learning to assimilate the results of the development of philosophy during the past two and a half thousand years.' Plekhanov, the Russian Marxist and the teacher of Lenin, was an able philosopher, the study

[1] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach.* [2] Stebbing, *Philosophy and the Physicists.*

of whose philosophical works Lenin regarded as indispensable. Lenin's own mind was naturally philosophical and his philosophical reading was systematic and unusually efficient. If his one great philosophical work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is not always appreciated it is because most of those who try to read it are totally unaware of the irrationalist philosophies which it criticizes.

Marxism is a classical development of European philosophy, a revolutionized Hegelianism. It is far from treating idealism with contempt. Idealism has its origin in a more critical account of human knowledge. It shows, rightly, the extreme difficulty of knowing exactly what the objects of experience really are. Now this criticism of our knowledge of the external world is not nonsense; it is the first step from vulgar philistinism to a more rational and scientific understanding of man and his relation to nature. The understanding of how *relative* all our knowledge is and of the important question as to whether we can know anything at all without altering it, is a matter of importance. Idealism is a reaction from the naïve belief in an abrupt presentation of physical things to the mind as if they could be known for what they are as simply as a photographic plate records a picture. It errs when, going beyond this, it denies the independent existence of the object of perception or asserts that we more really know our own sensations or mental states than any objects beyond them.

We cannot do without the contribution which idealism has made to our understanding of the world but on the other hand neither can we do with idealism as a philosophical system. Lenin says that it is only its *one-sidedness* which vitiates idealism. 'Philosophical idealism is nonsense only from the standpoint of a crude, simple and metaphysical materialism. On the contrary from the standpoint of dialectical materialism philosophical idealism is a one-sided, exaggerated, swollen development of one of the characteristic aspects or limits of knowledge.'[1] This aspect of knowledge is the fact of its relativity to the knower and to the conditions of knowing.

While *accepting* this 'characteristic aspect or limit of knowledge' which idealism has established, Marxism, and of course not only Marxism but many other philosophies, rejects the exaggeration of relativity into a doubt as to the existence of an independent world, which is characteristic of much idealism, and asserts instead what

[1] Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.*

we may call *the axiom of independent reality*. As Prichard states it, 'Knowledge unconditionally pre-supposes that the reality known exists independently of the knowledge of it, and that we know it as it exists in this independence.'

Marxism, therefore, does not flatly refute idealism as though the whole idealist movement from Descartes to Hegel had been a preposterous error. It does not brush Plato and his own disciples on one side. So far from engaging in a head-on collision in the Johnsonian style, as is the manner of the crude materialist, it absorbs even while it criticizes, it includes even while it transcends the idealist philosophy. In other words its whole attitude is dialectical.

## *II. Idealism and its Refutation*

BEFORE dealing with certain recent developments of idealist philosophy which are taking a very denfiite place in the modern mind, it is necessary to clear up the whole muddle about the theory that each mind perceives nothing but its own mental states. Once we have done so, and not before, the errors of our contemporaries can be successfully disposed of.

When a hard, square, red object, such as a brick, is perceived, we are perceiving a collection of qualities, and we usually believe that the object, the brick in this case, is that which *has* these qualities. But all such qualities are only known to us as mental experiences of colour and the like. The red patch is really, for our minds, a sense experience, not a brick. If we smell a rose we really smell an odour, and that too is a sense experience. Even the hardness and shape are tactile experiences. Let us call what we actually experience sense-data. It is clear that what we normally do is to interpret the sense-data as qualities of concrete objects and we say that we *perceive* the brick by *sensing its qualities*. The quality, we believe, requires a substance in which to inhere.

But does it? The whole notion of substance is a myth, says the idealist. The *thing* is nothing more than the sum of its *experienced qualities*. There can be no possible proof of anything else. But since all qualities reside only in percipient minds, the object itself must do the same. In brief, the object is of the nature of an idea.

If that is so the *idea* of a brick is not different from the idea of beauty, or squareness or God. They are all mentally real, but not real in any other way. Nor is a brick more real than squareness, or squareness less real than a brick.

But the plain man at once points out a significant difference. Not all ideas have the same status. Some are vividly and persistently held in our minds, *as if* these qualities inhered in some object before us, others are less objective, they are merely our ideas. The idealist grants this at once. He does not deny the existence of *objects which insist on being known* and which are persistently there. All that he is out to deny is that an experience of this kind requires a *material* universe. The experience, he argues, is not necessarily an experience of knowing a *material world*. It is only a peculiar kind of experience. It is still something mental. The real problem is what can be the *origin* of such an experience, if not a material object? But since, even if matter existed, it is rather hard to imagine how it would get across to something so different from itself as mind, why should not *something mental* be the cause of our experiences of collections of qualities?

Idealists differ considerably as to what mental or 'ideal' organ there might be for our perceptions. Bishop Berkeley, one of the ablest and the first of the modern idealists, held that the objects we perceive, not being of our own making, have their cause, but that cause is not matter, but God. The only realities, then, are God, other spirits created by Him, and the various ideas or experiences which He has ordained to be apprehended in certain regular sequences. Idealism, however, need not believe in God, and may instead simply rest in the ideal or mental character of all reality.

It will be seen that the upshot of the discussion is to disprove the existence of a material world and to suggest that the whole experienced universe is of the same nature as the mind. If that is the case, materialism is refuted and the principal objection to a religious explanation of the universe is removed. And that is precisely what the founder of modern idealism, Bishop Berkeley, intended. And very often it is precisely what our modern idealists have in mind as well.

Now what is the reply? To strike a great stone with the foot and say 'I refute it thus' is only to show that the theory has never even been understood.

We must do better than that. The refutation is simpler than might be supposed. When the idealist says that it is only our own mental states that we know, or that we certainly know them better than we know anything else, he is labouring under a misconception. Of course to know a thing is to have an idea of it but that does

not mean that you only know the idea. Because you cannot be conscious of the material world without thinking about it, it does not follow that all you are conscious of is your thinking! The fact that a known thing must, as an element of knowledge, be classed as an idea only means that when a thing is known it occupies a new relationship—the relationship of being known. But in thus assuming the status of an *idea*, as well as a material object, it does not by any means become identified with it. The object does not become an idea and nothing but an idea. Therefore whatever is known is not, just because it is thought about, itself of the nature of mind. The idealist has not yet proved his case, and it is up to him to prove that material objects do *not* exist. The *onus probandi* is not on the believer in material reality to prove that they do.

Let us put the matter a little differently. The idealist confuses the thing apprehended with the act of apprehension. A thought of a thing must be in the mind, but the thing of which we are aware is not in the mind, and is therefore not mental. We thus vindicate a common sense attitude to reality.

So far from mental experience shutting us up to pure subjectivism mind is essentially that which possesses the characteristic of becoming acquainted with things other than itself. The idealists treat knowing in a way which flatly traverses our experience. As Whitehead says, 'This experience knows away from and beyond our own personality—it is not a knowledge about our own personality.' Moreover it is not a passive perception of an un-get-at-able world, as if the observer were located in one of those glass observation chambers sunk in the sea. Knowledge is for action and results in action, and action means passing beyond the self into the world. That is why Lenin said that 'to ask outside the realm of practice whether the objective truth corresponds to human reason is scholasticism.'[1] It is the success of our actions, argues Engels, that proves the correspondence of our perception with the objective nature of the objects perceived. 'Practice ought to be the first and fundamental criterion of the theory of knowledge.'

There *are* purely mental experiences but they are quickly shown to be such by not standing up to the test of action. We then, rightly, call them illusions. If, on the other hand, any experience allows us to act upon it, *corrects* what was purely mental (i.e. illusory) by some sharp reaction or verifies the correctness of our perception

[1] Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p. 113.

by standing up to our activity, then we have no reason whatever to doubt its objectivity and materiality, e.g. a mirage does not allow us to slake our thirst, it vanishes as we approach. Real water is drinkable, can be splashed, objects float on it, it is wet, and so on.

'Our knowledge of nature is an experience of activity'.[1]

'If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and using it for our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end of the Kantian incomprehensible "thing-in-itself". The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such "things-in-themselves" until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the "thing-in-itself" became a thing for us.'[2]

In other words, there is a continual interaction between knower and known on the basis of his knowledge. What he knows enables him to act successfully. If his knowledge is not of the object as it is, is not correct, his action is unsuccessful and the result may be disastrous. Moreover, successful action changes the external situation and brings new facts before us, which we have to observe carefully and learn to know. This new knowledge immediately requires a new kind of action and so the process goes on.

Thus experience bears out the fact that we are very far from being locked up in the world of our own ideas. On the contrary we are always finding out things about the world outside us and adjusting ourselves by action to its requirements. Objectivity is of the essence of the experience.

It must, however, be carefully noted just *what* is refuted.

It is subjectivism, mentalism, that is the mistake.

But relativism is not a mistake. This is a fact of the greatest importance, a fact unknown to the older materialists, and ignored by the uncritical. What idealism bequeathes to us as a permanent heritage, is what Lenin calls *the dialectical element in knowledge*, the recognition of the relativity of all knowledge, of the fact that it is strictly conditioned, that what we know of it *depends* on a multitude of particular circumstances. This is the truth behind the fact that we perceive only *through* sense-data. We perceive objects, but the *qualities* of objects are *conditioned* in all manner of ways. Qualities do not merely *inhere* in substances but are given in the relationship of the observer to the object. In the object is 'the permanent

[1] Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*. [2] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*.

possibility of sensation'. That possibility is only realized under conditions, and not only the object but *what* the conditions are determine *what* the qualities are.

Yet once again we must beware of one-sidedness, of falling over backwards into a complete denial of objective truth and the assertion that all we know are fictions or symbols created by our *own* minds. However relative our knowledge to the conditions under which we know, whatever properties and laws we discover are really there and are as accurately recorded as the circumstances allow. The results are true as far as they go. This is less than naïve realism claims when it asserts that we know objects as they really and completely are in themselves, but very much more than is allowed by sceptical idealism which declares that we cannot be sure of anything at all outside of our own mental states. In other words each recorded observation and discovery is a step forward to absolute objective knowledge. The steps of our advancing science are partial and limited, but they advance into fuller and fuller truth.

Now we have hitherto been discussing only our knowledge and its conditions. But it is already obvious that we cannot separate (though we can distinguish) knowledge and its object. When we say that under certain conditions of temperature and light a certain substance is a colourless fluid, we are stating the limits of our knowledge at that moment and at the same time describing the object, not absolutely, but relatively. If we lower the temperature the same substance may become hard and opaque. This extends the limits of our knowledge and adds new properties, under new conditions, to the object. This is a very simple example but both modern science and modern philosophy are at one with Marxism in stressing *the great variability and the infinite potentiality of things*, which are not neat bundles of fixed qualities, but ever-changing complexes with explosive possibilities and a great range of properties, only few of which we at present know.

So that we no longer say: This is a hard square, red object, but: This is an object which to me, in this particular light, at this particular temperature, from here is a square, red object, and, in relation to what I am scratching it with, it is hard.

That of course, is simple enough. But it is not quite so simple when you begin to organize things into different patterns or combinations. Suddenly entirely new and unpredictable properties emerge. Chemical compounds have quite different properties from

the elements which combine to form them. Hydrogen is a gas, oxygen is a gas, but their combination in certain proportions is water. Organic substances have quite different properties from inorganic and yet may be synthesized from the inorganic. Protoplasm performs a synthesis which we cannot as yet perform in the laboratory; it builds organic substances first into proteins and then into protoplasm which then exhibits the characteristics of life—it respires, it reproduces itself, it moves, it excretes, it responds to stimulus.

Life is simply the property of a particular pattern or combination of previously non-living parts, but its reality and novelty are undeniable.

The relativity principle thus becomes the principle of emergence, the principle of the infinite potentiality of matter. It completely shatters the older materialist view that matter was a limited and almost altogether known affair which was certainly predictable in all its reactions and as certainly incapable of the transition from non-living to living. Now in so far as idealism insists that we do not know anything completely but only under the peculiarly limited conditions of each particular experience of knowing, it helps us, without mentalism or magic, to loosen up the rigidities of an earlier materialism.

But once again note that this is a statement about our knowledge and not only about matter. '*So far as I know*', we must always say, 'such and such is the case, or such and such are the properties of this thing.' Every statement of knowledge must be thus *qualified*. We can no longer say that we know anything *unconditionally*. Knowledge, we see, is not a 'reading off' of the specification of an object, but a statement of the result of a particular relationship between the knower and the known at a particular moment and under the unique conditions of that moment. Knowing is a two-way business in which the way I approach what I know, what I do in order to find out what it is, the conditions of my knowing, are quite as important as what the object is in itself.

### *III. The Refutation of Mechanistic Materialism*

A position almost identical with that of idealism has been reached by certain physiological materialists. This position has been expounded, for instance, by Bertrand Russell. They point out that our only evidence for the existence of an external world is given

by certain sensations which are themselves the result of nervous currents activating certain cells in the brain. These nerve currents are set up by purely physical stimuli, of heat, wave motion, pressure, applied to certain nerve endings in the skin, eye, ear and so forth. Now we have no reason at all to assume that the *mental end-effect* produced by a brain cell at the end of a long chain of physical or physiological events is in any way *like* the original stimulus, any more than the explosion of a cartridge is like the finger which pressed the trigger. The physiology of the human body and the brain, it is argued, shuts us up to *mental end-effects.* 'Everything that we can directly observe of the physical world,' says Bertrand Russell, 'happens inside our heads and consists of mental events. The development of this point of view will lead us to the conclusion that the distinction between mind and matter is illusory.' Thus a purely materialistic view ends up as something indistinguishable from idealism—an interesting example, by the way, of the Marxist law of a thing passing over into its opposite.[1] But by a curious inconsistency, as Whitehead has pointed out, these same people who express themselves as though bodies, brains and nerves were the only real things in an entirely imaginary world base all their evidence on the experimenters' perception of another person's body. But our evidence for the bodies we experiment upon and dissect in order to build up our science of physiology is of exactly the same type as, but weaker than, our evidence for the external world we are asked to deny. These materialists are treating bodies on materialist principles in order to treat all the rest of the world on idealist principles and it won't do. An excellent example, we may remark, of what Bosanquet called 'the meeting of extremes in contemporary philosophy'.

We have already indicated the reply. If we are quite sure that these end-effects are obtained by a physical stimulus falling on a specific nerve-ending or sense organ which can be fully described, as of course can the physical stimulus and its organ, if we are quite sure about the optic and other sensory nerves which we have dissected out and experimented with, and of the brain with its

[1] As Lenin said, dialectic is 'the teaching of how contradictions may be and are identical . . . how they turn into each other, the one always in process of turning into the other.' Engels, too, has spoken of the 'moving of opposites in one another's direction.' This position, however, must not be confused with more limited and abstract notion that opposites merely *logically* presuppose each other.

nerve cells, localized functions, visual and auditory areas, etc., all the result of endless experiments, we are surely pretty certain about the existence of at any rate that much of the external world, and if we find no reason to doubt that, why doubt the rest?

But the argument is, from the other end, so to speak, only Bishop Berkeley all over again. It is not a physiological argument for mentalism but a philosophical argument, and to that we have already replied.

In short Russell, like the bishop, confuses perceiving and the thing perceived, perception and the brain event. We do not perceive perceptions or even brain events, we perceive objects.

To the biologist no such doubts as to the existence of the external world are likely to occur because, unless he is a very bad biologist, he is concerned all the time not with a dead specimen on a dissecting board, in whose anatomy he is interested, but with a living organism functioning in an external environment, adapted to that environment and constantly reacting to it. The biologist works on two major assumptions, firstly that the animal is *aware* of its environment and has a most elaborate apparatus of sense organs and responsive mechanisms to keep it aware and to make swift reaction possible; secondly, he assumes that his organisms do function in relation to a real world and do know a great deal of it, enough of it to react satisfactorily, and survive. In fact if an animal is insufficiently aware of it the external world will, in the form of the inanimate environment or living enemies, very speedily terminate its existence.

The biologist also believes that while even his most primitive organisms possess this awareness and power of response, the most complex, including mammals and man, have developed awareness and response to an altogether amazing degree. Moreover, he knows that in the case of man, we have not only a very subtle and skilful control of behaviour in relation to environmental demands but foresight and *self-awareness*, of which there is no evidence among the simpler forms of animal life.

No biologist, except when he is thinking philosophically and thinking a wrong philosophy, is either a mentalist denying the external world or a mechanistic materialist. For him an animal exists in relation to a real environment and reacts with it through awareness and the power to know it.

The significance of the biological approach is immense. It is at

one and the same time a refutation of idealism and a refutation of that form of materialism which excludes mind from the universe. Constrained by its own subject matter, its own experience and experiment, biology holds together what man has too often put asunder, mind and matter.

The materialist who, believing only in the physiological mechanism leading to brain events, so surprisingly ends up as an idealist does not, of course, anticipate that this will prove the inevitable conclusion of his argument. He sets out to prove only that mind does not exist, that there is nothing properly to be called real but matter, which is limited to predictable chemical and physiological effects. For him, if consciousness occurs at all, it is either a sort of shadow cast by the brain or in some other way consistent with the complete dependence of mind on matter. Consciousness, in that case, becomes a product without consequences, as a chalk mark left by drawing with a piece of chalk on a board is an effect left by the passage of the chalk but has, as a mark, no effect itself on the chalk nor the hand which moves the chalk. This for most materialists is the conclusion of the argument and it is the classical position of what is often called mechanistic materialism but more generally known simply as the materialist philosophy.

Marxism has always strenuously opposed this form of materialism on the ground that it is in flat contradiction of the evidence to reduce life and consciousness to chemistry. Marxism does not deny the reality of either life or mind. It asserts, however that they are functions of highly organized matter on the organic level. 'Every level of organization', says Needham, 'has its own regularities and principles, not reducible to those appropriate to lower levels of organization, nor applicable to higher levels, but at the same time in no way inscrutable or immune from scientific analysis or comprehension.'[1] Therefore the levels of life and mind are not reducible to physics and chemistry but are unique, with their own special characteristics, modes of behaviour and laws.

*But the Marxist does not attribute these special characteristics to the infusion of a vital principle into matter from the realm of mind or spirit.* He claims that in the realm of nature are to be found different organizational levels in an ascending series. 'From ultimate physical particle to atom, from atom to molecule, from molecule to colloidal aggregate, from aggregate to living cell, from cell to organ, from

[1] Joseph Needham, *Time the Refreshing River.*

organ to body, from animal body to social association, the series of organizational levels is complete.'[1] Just as life in its simplest form is characteristic of the colloidal aggregation of proteins known as protoplasm, and has the altogether new power in nature of synthesizing new protoplasm from organic acids, so protoplasm organized in a living cell follows this power of organic growth with the new powers of reproduction, of self-repair, of response to stimulus. At a higher level still, specialized cells concern themselves wholly with registering impressions from the environment and bringing about the activation of muscles which secures an appropriate response. These nerves are called receptors and effectors. Finally a complex organization of nerve cells is interposed between receptors and effectors, first to provide a multitude of alternative associations, like a telephone exchange, but ultimately to *think* about the situation revealed by the receptors, in order that the effect or discharge may bring about *considered*, problem-solving action. In other words, when matter is organized in nerves it feels and acts, when matter is organized in a brain *it thinks*. *Thought*, *mind*, is not a substance added to matter, it is a *function* of a certain kind of matter. This is a conclusion as perfectly in harmony with biological science as mechanistic materialism is in contradiction to it. It is, of course, a view held not only by Marxists but by most, if not all, professional biologists and by an increasing number of philosophers with a real knowledge of biology.

The mechanistic materialist has formulated his position in an honest endeavour to be true to scientific principles, to seek out scientific causes, not to multiply entities and fall back in every case of difficulty upon the supernatural. He is above all things in violent reaction from vitalism, which injects a living force into matter to explain life. He is fundamentally opposed to the theory of the interaction of two completely disparate entities—mind and body.

All this is perfectly correct and even in this narrow and somewhat rigid form, materialism has broadened the field of science, firmly established the scientific method and done much to overthrow obscurantism and superstition.

But the mechanist in banishing mind from the universe because he cannot accept the interaction of mind and matter, really presupposes this fundamental dualism, this parallel existence of a matter without mind and a mind without matter. If he didn't have

[1] Needham, *loc. cit.*

in the back of his head the notion that consciousness is a thing in itself, that *mind could only be* a distinct mind stuff (even though he doesn't believe in it), he would not raise the question as to how interaction is possible. He would not discard consciousness if he did not believe in the first place that consciousness is a mysterious thing which intervenes to make dead matter live. In other words he himself has an idealistic attitude to the mind. Like the idealist he says: matter cannot think; and like the idealist he says: if thought exists at all it must exist as a thing in itself, as something mental, out of space and time.

The mechanistic materialist is, in spite of himself, constantly lapsing into idealism. Either he begins to talk about mental end-effects and then finds he has no evidence for the existence of matter at all, or, baffled by having only a physico-chemical universe which is by definition destitute of mind and values, he finds himself driven into supernaturalism. For although *ex hypothesi* matter cannot think and nothing exists except atoms and molecules, it is perfectly clear to the materialist in his own experience that the universe contains living, changing, evolving beings, quite unaccountable by the laws of chemistry and physics and quite unpredictable in their developments. Therefore God or the Life Force must breathe into these dead bones the breath of life; a transcendental world must be superimposed upon the purely physical.

It is the barrenness of mechanism, its complete incapacity to explain the rich, mental, moral and ideal experience of the concrete world that precipitates those who come under its influence into mysticism. Thus a considerable influence in the direction of superstition and mysticism in the world of thought today is mechanistic materialism itself. We shall shortly consider some striking examples, but before doing so it is necessary to find some explanation of this bewildering state of affairs. Why does mechanistic materialism turn into its opposite, idealism?

### *IV. The Delusion of Dualism*

The reason is a simple one. Both mechanistic materialism and idealism derive from an unnatural splitting of the universe into disparate realities, mind and matter. This took place, in certain historical conditions which we cannot go into, under the influence of the French philosopher Descartes (1637). Descartes set science on its feet by showing that (from one point of view) the universe is

extended substance (occupying space) and exhaustively comprehended in the terms of mathematics. 'Give me extension and motion', he said, ' and I will construct the universe.' But how, in that case, account for mind? Descartes held that mind also exists, but it cannot interact with matter since it does not occupy space. Thus arose that strange philosophical bifurcation of the universe which has not been overcome down to our own day. It had two opposite consequences. On the one hand science went ahead and by the immense success of its purely mathematical approach, and just because it ruled out the supernatural, achieved considerable victories. Its followers dropped the idealism of Descartes. They could do without the realm of pure spirit. It was entirely superfluous. On the other hand, those who based their thinking on Descartes' proofs of the existence of pure spirit, soon found they had no need for matter. They became pure idealists.

Thus there came into existence two opposing philosophies, materialism and idealism, each of which really implied the other. They were the two halves of an indissoluble whole. The materialist has stripped the universe of mind, but he has not got rid of it. He cannot. It is, if not the skeleton, at any rate the ghost in his cupboard, and it is always plaguing him. If the physical universe is without mind, then mind must exist as a thing in itself, and to that conclusion men will continue to come as certainly as water will come in through the holes of a sieve. They are wrong, of course, but they are forced to be wrong in order somehow to justify the indisputable evidence for the mental and spiritual elements in human life.

In their efforts to win back the mind which is separate from matter they will be compelled to follow one of two courses. The first solution is to go back to dualism and stand these utterly incompatible entities side by side, invoking magic or the supernatural, to explain their interaction (this was the position of the psychologist William McDougall and is today the position of Joad). The alternative solution, natural to those convinced of the independent reality of mind, is to deny the existence of matter, except as a construct or projection or creation of mind, and we slide rapidly down into mentalism again.

The firm believer in the self-existence of mind is also an inverted materialist since he also believes that matter cannot think. Thus, in a recent Brains Trust, Joad disagreed with the medical man

who asserted that the mind ceases to assimilate new ideas in old age because of hardening of the arteries. 'Surely,' said Joad, 'we must distinguish between the mind and the brain. What assimilates new facts is not the brain but the mind. A piece of matter cannot know anything, cannot contain a fact, it can only move about. What happens to the brain cannot possibly affect the mind.' To which the doctor replied that it was evident that Joad did not know very much about physiology.

Let us note one other consequence. There is a sham fight on. A battle between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. It is this head-on collision between the materialists and the idealists. It is a useless and confusing procedure. They are both right and they are both wrong. The presuppositions of both are wrong. It is a mistake to prove to the materialist that mind exists as something over against matter. But it is equally a mistake to prove that matter is mindless. The materialist has got to see that matter (in brains) can think. The idealist has got to see that thinking, being real enough, nevertheless never takes place except in brains.

Now this is a dialectical solution and Marxism is a dialectical philosophy. Descartes splits the unity of thinking matter and creates the thesis and anti-thesis of the opposites, body and mind. This is an historical necessity and a phase in the development of science and thought. But it is not a final phase. It creates insoluble contradictions. They are resolved, not *eclectically* by tying up mind and matter side by side, but dialectically, by a return to the original unity *on a higher level*. 'The identity of opposites,' says Lenin, 'more accurately perhaps their unity, is the recognition of the mutually exclusive and opposed tendencies in all the phenomena and processes of nature.'[1] 'The existence of two mutually contradictory aspects, their conflict and their flowing together into a new category,' wrote Marx, 'comprises the essence of the dialectical movement.'

In the new synthesis we embrace the manifold achievements of mechanistic science and idealist philosophy (and they are great). We enrich that unity and we resolve the contradictions. That is the Marxist as it is the biological and philosophical solution of the Body-Mind problem.

Marxism maintains the unity and interpenetration of opposites which we find in the concrete world. Mind and matter are united

[1] Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.*

and interdependent. Pure matter is an abstraction, and while it may be useful enough to abstract the physical or mathematical properties of matter for practical purposes, yet we must put what we have, on paper, or in our heads, separated from the more complex whole, back into that whole when we have finished.

Not only is this true of living things, it is also true of the physical universe which, to be known and understood at all, has to be brought into close relations with living beings. As we have seen earlier, what we know depends largely on the range of our senses, on what we actually *do* with things, on the nature of our experiments, and on the nature of our requirements. In this way, too, mind and matter interpenetrate and an organic unity exists in all knowledge, a unity of knower and known.

Out of the artificial dualism which we have criticized arise not only mechanistic materialism and idealism, but a host of philosophical aberrations, some of them of considerable popularity. They constitute the current philosophy of our times in its idealist aspect and are not without social significance.

We propose to consider some idealistic consequences of philosophical dualism current today, and to indicate their results in the social and political sphere.

### *V. Sir James Jeans and the Disintegration of Matter*

It is frequently stated today in pseudo-philosophical writings and in the pulpit that the old idea of matter as a non-mental, external and objective reality has gone, that modern science has refined and dissolved matter away into something so intangible, so tenuous, so shot through with purely mental elements as to be, virtually, something more spiritual than material. If this be so, then the idealist's claim is greatly reinforced. There can certainly be a realm of pure spirit with all that that implies. Endless vistas of spiritual entities open up, none of which of course have need to be even associated with a material substratum.

Sir Arthur Eddington and Sir James Jeans have done more than anyone else to popularize such a notion, and it has of course been taken up enthusiastically by ministers of religion, broadcasters and journalists. Eddington declares that the floor on which we stand is not really solid. 'The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies.'[1]

[1] Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World.*

Another writer says, 'A table, a piece of paper, no longer possesses *that solid reality which they appear to possess*; they are both of them porous, and consist of very small electrically charged particles.'[1] And Joad points out that the materialistic view of matter which conceived of 'the atom as a hard, simple, obvious little lump of stuff' is out of date. 'This has disappeared: modern matter is something infinitely attenuated and elusive; it is a hump in space-time, a "mush of electricity", a wave of probability undulating into nothingness. Frequently it turns out not to be matter at all but a projection from the consciousness of the perceiver.'[2]

Sir James Jeans sums it up by saying, 'The fact that so much of what used to be thought to possess an objective physical existence now proves to consist only of subjective mental constructs must surely be counted a pronounced step in the direction of mentalism.'[3]

However, Stebbing, who has subjected these philosophical deductions from modern physics to acute criticism in her *Philosophy and the Physicists*, sums up by saying: 'In my opinion, at least, modern theories of the atom afford not the slightest justification for saying that recent developments in physics have any tendency to show that materialism is false or are capable of being used to provide any argument in favour of idealism.'[4]

There are three separate fallacies involved in the idealist position.

*Firstly*, all that is really meant by modern science is that the nineteenth-century view of matter, at the ultra-microscopic level, is out of date. It no longer consists of hard, indivisible billiard-ball-like atoms but of electrical phenomena. But *neither* view has got anything at all to do with *solidity on the level of ordinary experience*. On that level matter is as solid as ever it was, it not only *appears* to be solid, it *is* solid, it does 'possess that solid reality which it appears to possess'. The scientist does not deny that however tenuous and impalpable the ultimate constituents of matter may be, the result in our man-size world is ordinary tables and chairs which the scientist believes in like everybody else.

*Secondly*, however tenuous and non-solid ultra-microscopic matter is found to be, it does not cease to be matter. Matter has merely been further described. It has only ceased to be material in the common use of that word, not in the exact or in the scientific

[1] Ernst Zimmer, *The Revolution in Physics* (our italics).
[2] Joad, *God and Evil.*
[3] Jeans, *Physics and Philosophy.* [4] Stebbing, *loc. cit.*

sense. For anything is matter that exists prior to man and prior to mind, that is an objective reality existing independently of the human mind and subsequently known by it. 'The sole property of matter with which materialists are concerned,' says Lenin,[1] 'is the property of being objective reality, of existing outside our cognition . . . The recognition of immutable elements is not materialism—it is only mechanistic or metaphysical materialism. Whether we speak of electrons or what, we ask one fundamental question—Do they exist as objective realities outside the human mind?'[2]

Matter is akin to energy and radiation. But these obviously belong to the physical, i.e. material, world. Sunlight possesses inertia and is bent in a gravitational field. 'The discovery that matter, as regards its inertial property, is not different from sunlight does not in the least tend to abolish the distinction which we recognize between the mental and the material.' When modern science refuted the billiard-ball theory of the mechanists, some philosophers 'not only threw out the bath water, but the baby as well. By denying the immutability of the elements and properties of matter known hitherto, they ended with the denial of matter, the denial of the objective reality of the physical world.'[3]

*Thirdly*, from the lack of solidity on the ultra-microscopic level, from the mathematical abstractions which help us to understand matter at that level, and from the undeniable fact of the relativity of our knowledge (that which we know depends on how we handle it, on our limitations, our conditions of knowledge) they pass over into pure mentalism, as Joad does, matter becomes 'a projection from the consciousness of the perceiver'.

But this does not follow. We have already discussed the dependence of knowledge on the point of view of the knower and shown that dependence does not rule out independence. The argument is of sufficient importance to be recalled. *That* the object exists independently of us is an unchangeable fact; *what* it is exactly we know only in part, in aspects, with but an approximate degree of truth. That what we thus know is true as far as it goes we know because we act successfully on that knowledge. So far from matter dissolving into mind, mind remains that which possesses the characteristic of becoming acquainted with things other than

[1] Lenin speaks, of course, as a dialectical materialist, not as a mechanist.
[2] and [3] Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

itself, while matter remains that which is known. Relativity does not lessen objectivity. All perception is a judgment of *thereness*. We do not *infer* an object because we *have* a perception; perception involves a judgment of external reality and needs no inference. We do not perceive ideas, or abstractions. We perceive *something*.

We thus refute subjectivism not by reasserting a naïve, uncritical realism, not by going blindly back to mechanistic materialism, but by taking up into our objectivism the subjective factors of knowledge. We come back to the objective world again but with a new conception of our relation to it, which is no longer that of a contemplative eye passively observing it, or a 'spot-light' falling upon it to enable us to 'read off' what is *out there*, but is that of an organic unity between knower and known. 'Duality in unity is implied in all experience,' says James Ward, 'but not dualism.'

It is doubtful if such views would ever have become so widely held but for the fact that a breach in the walls of scientific knowledge may be expected to let in a host of phantoms from the supernatural realm which may be taken for realities.

If reality is mind, then there may be mental or spiritual realities outside the physical universe, outside of space and time, unknowable and unverifiable by the senses but accessible to spirit through spiritual organs of apprehension or intuition. This belief opens the floodgates to every form of superstition and mentalism.

Instead of seeking out the scientific causes of disease the man who believes in the supernatural may attribute it to black magic, or devils, or a punishment from God. Instead of installing a waterborne sewage system, he resorts to prayer and sacrifice. Natives in Central Africa when they fail in their primitive methods of iron-smelting do not try to find out what technical error they have made, but attribute their failure to someone having bewitched them. Superstition is therefore not only a reflection of ignorance; it tends to perpetuate it. Eventually science is held to be something blasphemous. It is irreligious to take out of the sphere of the spiritual or of Providence that which rightly belongs to it. Russian peasants under the Czar attributed famine not to shallow ploughing but to the Divine Wrath. They were taught to accept epidemics as a discipline of the soul. In India today superstition still obstructs social advance. Even in our own country trade depression, wars, disease and poverty are often felt to be divine dispensations, or

due to irresistible and inscrutable forces which it is folly for us to seek to control and presumptuous to seek to understand.

If it should be contrary to the interests of any privileged section of the community to remove these evils, it will be seen how the superstition which paralyses man's efforts serves their ends. In this fact we have, perhaps, one of the reasons for the revival of idealism in an age in which many social evils exist and in which the remedies at hand conflict with vested interests.

'Is it not odd,' asks Stebbing, 'that men should welcome, as some do, any indication of unreason in the world?' No, it is not at all odd. The approach of scientific reason, in physical science, in biology and medicine, and above all in sociology, is a hard discipline. It is easier to invoke the supernatural or to yield to inscrutable powers, than to wrestle with Nature, learn her laws and control the world. In sociology, moreover, the interests of the privileged may be immediately threatened by sound social theory. In that case it will be desirable that knowledge should be clouded and human power to interfere enfeebled.

This does not mean, of course, that every idealist is *consciously* defending his cash interests or the interests of a privileged class, but it does suggest that in a society ruled by and ideologically dominated by such interests there will be a certain pressure or drift away from scientific social thinking and towards idealism, superstition and supernaturalism, and that the greater the danger of social change, the more widespread will superstition tend to become.

## *VI. Modern Irrationalism*

There is an implicit irrationalism wherever scientific inquiry is ruled out of any part of experience. All supernaturalism is irrational because in it there can be no discovery of ascertainable and verifiable laws of cause and effect. All is conjecture or dependence on unprovable 'revelation'. Men find themselves deducing from unprovable *a priori* principles, as revealed truths, what must or must not be so. The result is that there will be as many systems as there are sets of unproved dogmas, all mutually exclusive. When man cannot find the truth of science he is forced to accept the truth of his own intuition and that means complete subjectivism, believing what is strongly, even overwhelmingly, felt to be true at the moment. Psychology tells us what an infinity of mental delusions such beliefs lay us open to.

But there are movements today of the first importance which base irrationalism not on pure mentalism, not on the need for a vital force to explain life or causation, but on the very nature of scientific knowledge itself. The chief protagonist is again Eddington, but he is only the last of a long line of irrationalist philosophers and scientists from Mach and Avenarius to Bergson and Vaihinger. This view is that science never gets beyond its own perceptions and the more or less arbitrary ways in which they are built up by the mind into scientific constructs. These come, mistakenly, to be regarded as external objects and scientific laws. 'All through the physical world,' says Eddington, 'runs an unknown content, which must really be the stuff of our own consciousness. We have found that where science has progressed the farthest, the mind has but regained from nature that which the mind has put into nature.'[1] Scientific laws and, in fact, the whole scientific description of the world, thus come to be a collection of fictions or abstractions which, to use an example of Eddington's, no more describe the reality they stand for than the numbers of telephone subscribers tell us anything about the subscribers themselves. The theory, in some quarters, is extended to overthrow the whole notion of causation and scientific law and to substitute mere succession or observed regularities. Thus a wire glows when you pass electricity through it, but we must not say that the electricity *causes* the rise in temperature, we have merely two events which frequently occur together so that there is the *probability* of them doing so again. There can be no *necessary* connection between the so-called cause and effect. As Joad rightly says of this whole point of view, 'it strikes the authentic subjectivist note.'

It is a much older theory than most people suppose. The first exhaustive criticism of it, indeed, was Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, published in 1909, in which Mach, Avenarius, Karl Pearson, Ostwald, Poincaré (the scientist) and the Neo-Kantians come in for severe criticism.

Once again the issue cannot be resolved by head-on collision. The irrationalists and fictionalists have got something.

They are in revolt from a much too rigid rationalism and from a naïve 'spot-light' view of scientific knowledge. Objects are not like a neat row of exhibits on a shelf which can be accurately labelled. Laws are not a collection of fixed and final legal *rules*,

[1] Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World.*

which things must *obey*, and which science looks up and reads off in the great textbook of nature. 'Cause and effect' in nature is not the same thing as the logical necessity by which the conclusion of a syllogism is reached. The effect is not in the cause as the conclusion is contained in the premises. That kind of a mechanical universe never existed. It is correct, too, that all formulations are abstractions, freeze the flowing moment, select an aspect from an infinity of possibilities. It is true that in all knowledge the knower is so tied up with what he knows that you cannot separate them. Knowledge, as we have said, is an organic relation and a relation of selectivity and activity, not a bare contemplative reflection.

But because the mechanical universe of naïve science does not exist there is no need to abandon the objectivity of things and the reality of laws. That, as Lenin said, is to empty out the baby with the bath water.

All such doubts are based upon the erroneous notion that true knowledge is the perception of an external object which is precisely what it is apart from our knowing it, 'an intuitive apprehension of the real' and necessarily always infallible; and it is also based upon the view that we ought never to rest content with anything less than a full, coercive and infallible knowledge. Once this simple dogmatism is subjected to the thorough-going criticism of relativism, the tendency is to abandon it for sheer irrationalism.

But reality is not overthrown by its relational character but is so constituted. It is only the ghost of a strict rationalism which condemns us to despair.

These criticisms of scientific reality are due to the unavailing struggle to apprehend with logical certainty the structure of a finished reality as it stands over against a passive observer. Once it is seen that reality can be truly if imperfectly known only as a construct in which mind and nature are partners, then we shall see that while our claims to know may be modest, they may nevertheless be firm.

Just as idealism refutes a naïve realism, so does irrationalism, but it goes too far. The mind does contribute a great deal to the scientific picture of reality, which is not merely 'read off'. Hypotheses, models, fictions, categories, all imply mental activity not a passive reflection of reality. But there is a way of making sure that the element of construction inherent in our scientific thinking is valid, and not, as irrationalism believes, mere fiction.

We do not only observe and think, we experiment. 'We can test both our theories and the observation on which they are based by our success or failure in acting upon them. If our imaginary constructions cannot be used to anticipate correctly the results of our activities, they cannot be valid. Experiment is an essential part of our means of distinguishing between constructions which are knowledge and constructions which are merely efforts of the imagination.'[1] Such experiment moreover is 'not an appeal from thought to perception but an appeal from reflection and imagination to action, from theoretical experience to practical experience.'[2]

Irrationalism, however, is more than a philosophical error; it has the most serious social consequences.

1. Truth becomes anything we can get believed, any pattern convenient to ourselves, into which we can force the facts. The Fascist attempt to coerce the facts is a good example of this.

2. On the other hand, if the universe is irrational, no honest man can really have faith in any theory, since he knows it is really only the shape his own mind puts upon events. The economic and political theories of Socialism are not truths but fictions, myths. Conviction therefore comes to depend not on understanding reality but on faith. And that kind of faith is not what men die for.

3. Finally, this view sees in the objective world only chaos and lawlessness, since order and law are simply the mental spectacles through which we choose to look. The conclusion for every honest mind is to throw away the spectacles and face the sheer brute irrationality of life, a creed of complete despair. In a declining civilization torn with insoluble contradictions and distressed with hopeless paradoxes, chaos is of course a fact, and that is why irrational theories of the world and flights to realms of purely mental peace or supernatural perfection are so common. But both reactions avoid the plain task of understanding the world in its chaos, diagnosing its evils and reconstructing it. Such theories are therefore popular with those who either cannot, or dare not, or will not, face that task.

### *VII. A Pluralistic Universe*

ANOTHER strange consequence may follow from this idealistic reaction. Instead of accepting one or the other of the two sides of dualism, it is possible to accept *both*. We thus come to attach equal

[1] Macmurray, *The Boundaries of Science.* [2] *Ibid.*

validity to the realities of the external world of sense and to the realities of the mind. What are these realities? Firstly, of course, our own minds or spirits. Secondly, a whole range of mental or spiritual realities which mind has the power to apprehend, including the absolutes: Truth, Beauty and Goodness. Such realities, says Joad, who is one of the principal upholders of this view, are known by means of a faculty which only minds at a certain level of development have evolved. They are not objects of perception, but first of all objects of thought. From this level we proceed to objects of value, which are apprehended by insight, and those ultimate realities which are known only to mystical intuition. 'The objects to which the philosopher's mind is directed belong entirely to the world of thought.' 'The objects of philosophy lie on those confines of the world of thought which are furthest from the physical realm and also nearest to the realm of values.'[1] Hence the aloofness of the true philosopher. His mind is normally directed upon the objects of a non-physical world and he cannot easily bring attention to bear upon the contents of the physical one.

But it is clear that once the fallacies of idealism are exposed, the so-called realities of dualism and pluralism are seen to be mental projections and nothing else, qualities and functions of the material torn off and given independent existence. Going back for a moment to Descartes' dualism, we see that it is the product of a vicious abstraction which separates the complex organic reality into mind and body, knower and known, dead matter and live minds. From such a position it is inevitable to conceive mind, if it is accepted at all, as a thing in itself.

From such pluralistic beliefs arise a whole succession of fatal heresies. Men spend their time in contemplating, pursuing, arguing about and worshipping projected aspects of their own consciousness or sub-consciousness. It is a waste of time. It directs attention away from the concrete. It is as if a doctor were equally concerned with the exorcism of devils and with germs, or a scientist were not quite sure whether magic or mechanics should establish the principles of aeroplane construction.

The Harvard philosopher Santayana has devoted his great gifts to the cult of this form of idealism. His other-worldliness, his ascetic rapture over pure beauty and the ideal world spring from his discovery 'in the heart of metaphysics of that perfection he

[1] Joad, *The Return to Philosophy.*

vainly sought in nature and in reason. He has come full circle to a Platonic insight that looks upon all life as fleeting and imperfect and somehow unsatisfactory. He is at last a 'free soul', bound to this earth by only the slightest of ties, and ever ready to turn his back on these.'[1]

This contemplative habit obviously finds more satisfaction in solitude than in society, in art than in business, in prayer than in politics. It is stimulated by looking inwards, contemplatively, rather than by looking outwards to see what needs to be done. The world has not to be altered but only understood by mystical insight, by seeing all things under the form of eternity.

Such theories invariably affirm the superiority of the spiritual over the material. The more abstract and unreal, indeed, the more sacred the reality. The consequence is to give the utmost importance to the non-real and little or no importance to the real.

The result is not only complete futility, but in pursuing this will-o'-the wisp such people turn away from and condemn every sane, rational and scientific approach to the problems before them as doomed to failure because it neglects the spiritual. Thus they drift into opposition to all schemes and movements for social reform.

Fortunately most idealists are sufficiently inconsistent to attempt to make the best of both worlds, an attempt not, however, likely to succeed since their theories tend inevitably to vitiate their saner and more rational impulses. What must be the influence, for example, of Mr. Gerald Heard on his disciples? He comes forward as himself the prophet or mystic to point the way to the higher life. Yet the loftier his claims, the more completely empty of content or reason do they appear; the more woolly are his ideas, the more verbal his precepts. 'He is the neo-Brahmin. He is the pilot. He is the antennae of the new society. He specializes in and communicates spiritual power. He is in touch with the Source. I only wish I could escape the impression that he is selling something the nature of which, unfortunately, cannot be divulged.'[2]

Once again the door is flung wide open to every form of self-delusion and charlatanism. Once the criterion of conformity to external material reality, of experiment and practice, is removed,

[1] Howgate, *George Santayana.*

[2] G. W. Stonier, Review in the *Sunday Times* of *Man the Master* by Gerald Heard.

literally anything can be exalted into a spiritual thing-in-itself. The wise and good exalt into mystical realities their own wisdom and goodness, but the fool worships his folly and the villain his villainy. In fact, as Chesterton pointed out, long ago, 'When Jones begins to worship the God within, he usually ends up by worshipping Jones'.

There is another side to the cult of the non-material, and that is the degradation of the physical. Beginning with Plato the idealist tends, in separating consciousness, and with it human values, from the body to abandon the body to non-human, that is to say, animal propensities. If the higher life is in the realm of spirit, it can only be followed by turning one's back on the life that belongs to the flesh, which is on a lower plane. It is a simple step to associate all that is evil in life with the material or bodily side and all that is noble with the spiritual—as if there were not as much and more spiritual evil than bodily! There follows the doctrine of original sin or the innate corruption of human nature, the seat of that corruption being the flesh. What Plato left undone in riveting this heresy upon men's minds St. Paul and St. Augustine completed. The result today is that social evil is attributed not to error, or historical causes, not to economic or class interests but to the ineradicable and inscrutable evil in human nature. This provides a welcome alibi for the real interests opposing reform, spreads a pessimism and defeatism equally useful in preserving the *status quo* and directs the whole of human effort to the task of purifying the soul by breaking its links with the world and its temptations, in other words to the task of lifting oneself by one's own boot-straps.

Much has been written recently to disparage that social effort which assumes that man can behave decently, Social reformers, we are told, neglect man's inherent wickedness, attempting 'to explain his being and purpose on one plane'. The dualistic or religious view is that man has being on two planes, the material and the spiritual, and therefore needs redemption.[1]

'Society,' says Aldous Huxley, 'can never be greatly improved until such time as most of its members choose to become theocentric saints.' If our fathers had argued in this way few great reforms would have been achieved. Today it is 'calculated to spread alarm and despondency in the minds of men and women of goodwill

[1] Nicholson, *Man and Literature*. Griffith, *Interpreters of Man*.

who would otherwise give their practical aid and support to progressive social policies.'[1]

This literary pessimism which is widespread both in criticism and in creative work is a true reflection of the conditions which have shaped them. It is, philosophically, clearly related to irrationalism and subjectivism on the one hand, and to a decadent modern theology on the other. A typical example is the late Bernard Lord Manning, a modern Calvinist, starkly opposed to Modernism. His deepest dissent was from 'the belief that man and his world are good, that given a chance they will develop alright.' What he stood for was 'renunciation, not amelioration, of the world; transformation, not development, of the individual'.

The optimistic literature of the early Shaw and Wells, based on the belief that man was essentially a rational and decent creature, has suffered shipwreck. Man will listen neither to sermons nor to reason. His nature is not fundamentally good but evil, as the psycho-analysts have shown. The reaction begins with Hardy and Housman who viewed man as the sport of Nature in some sense malignant:

> 'And how am I to face the odds
> Of man's bedevilment and God's?'

Lawrence found the human soul diseased, and his cure was for man to become possessed not by a divine but by an inhuman will, or, as he put it, 'to *be* inhumanly, physiologically, materially, not to feel according to the human conception'. Social collapse and frustration, the war and the appalling moral debacle of the Axis peoples reveal man as an imperfect and sinful creature. Three writers who take the lid off humanity are mentioned by Nicholson. They are Joyce, with his Catholic background, Kafka who wrote fantastic allegories or nightmares on the impotence of man, and T. S. Eliot. In all of them is a Catholic sense of sin, self-disparagement, defeatism, loneliness, cynicism and pedantry. As Connolly says of Joyce, 'tortured with the lapsed Catholic's guilt', we find in him 'horror and delight in failure'. He has turned away from social responsibilities, 'I am afraid I am more interested, Mr. Connolly, in the Dublin street names than in the riddle of the Universe'.

No one would question Joyce's influence on literature, his

[1] Needham, *Time the Refreshing River.*

extremely sensitive auditory imagination, his enrichment of language. His realism, too, pays the tribute of all devotees of pure experience (from Mach to Bergson) to the unique value and validity of each separate moment of consciousness. His sense of the interpenetration of all moments of reality is not only experiential and poetic but reflects Whitehead's view of reality as *process* in which an infinite number of factors and relations determine each fleeting event and 'the world which we see about us is involved in some more intimate fashion than is ordinarily supposed with the things that go on in our minds'.

Nevertheless, as Edmund Wilson[1] shows, this whole literary tendency reflects a desire to stand apart from the common life and live only in the imagination—not for the fruit of experience, but for experience itself. Reflecting the decadence of their class, such writers are 'the last historians of Heartbreak House'. Hence the 'ineffectual fragmentary imagination, the impotence and resignation of Eliot':[2]

> 'This is the way the world ends
> Not with a bang but a whimper.'

There falls on literature a sullenness, a lethargy, a sense of energies ingrown and festering, while poetry is dully weighted by a leaden acquiescence in defeat. Eventually, as Wilson says, 'literature, music and painting become the three branches of neurology'. (Eliot, defending classicism, Royalism and Catholicism, says, 'We fight rather to keep something alive than in expectation that anything will triumph.')

The social criticism of such writers 'does not aim at anything: it is an exercise of the pure intelligence not driven by the motor power of any hope and not directed by any creative imagination for the possibilities of human life. If they ever indicate a preference for any social order different from the present one, it is invariably for some society of the past.'

Yet their achievement is considerable. They were correct in refuting the shallow optimism that foresaw man righting the universe by sheer power of will and reason, man out of relation to his class or conditions, man taking no heed of developing social forces and declining institutions. They were right in depicting

[1] Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* and *The Wound and the Bow*.
[2] Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle*.

society as disintegrating and corrupt. They were right again in their disruption of mere materialism and naturalism, in welding body and mind in indissoluble unity.

They were wrong in isolating man as a mere point-instant of experience, in forgetting the fact that man without fellowship, without membership in society, is nothing. 'Forsooth brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell; fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death; and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane.'[1]

## *VIII. Modern Magic*

ONE of the inevitable results of draining everything but the physical and chemical out of matter and so reducing it to pure mechanism is that it becomes quite impossible to account on rational grounds for the objective phenomena of life and mind and for the evolution of the living out of the non-living. The attempt to explain these away by reducing them to physical terms is so hopelessly artificial that it immediately breaks down. Now since *ex hypothesi* the only material factors are mechanical and the only scientifically rational effects are calculable and predictable resultants, how do you account for life, and how do you explain the evolution of totally new and unpredictable types, such as the bird evolving out of a reptile? There can be only one solution—a vital force must be at work. But it is the whole aim of the scientist to reduce such new effects to law, to analyse until he has all the conditions and factors responsible for them. To invoke a vital force is to sabotage investigation and scientists have been severe on the vitalists in consequence. Biologists have strongly opposed the attribution of evolution to this non-material mystical urge, this impact of pure spirit on pure matter. They have sought and, to a considerable and steadily increasing degree, found scientific causes for evolutionary change. Where gaps in the causal chain are still unbridged the scientist does not immediately postulate the necessity for miracle but simply continues his investigation in the faith that discoverable causes are there. He points out that it is precisely this attitude, in contradiction to baffled surrender

[1] William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball.*

to vitalism, that has in the past solved innumerable similar problems which would never have been solved if a supernatural cause had been assumed.

Vitalism, however, arises from a mistake as to the real meaning of cause and effect. When Eddington declares that 'no physicist today believes in scientific determinism' he expresses the common irrationalist view that law is only a statement of high probability based on statistical averages and not, therefore, a statement of *necessity*. If this is the case, then three important results follow. Firstly, the door is opened to the operation of purely spiritual factors, thus vindicating the reality and independence of the non-material world. Secondly, an indefinite sphere is indicated outside the bounds of scientific understanding and control, within which will be included human conduct, society, politics and economics. Thirdly, science itself suffers. Law has always been regarded by scientists as a higher level of physical reality which *explains* the world as we find it in experience. This new doctrine rejects that notion and asserts that there are nothing but experiences or facts and that 'laws' merely summarize them for our convenience.

The older scientific view was based on the theory that the only kind of law or causal necessity was a mathematical or logical one in which reason by itself can deduce the effect from the cause or find the effect to be already in the cause, in which case, of course, nothing really new can ever happen.

In so far as vitalism shows this view to be inadequate, it renders a valuable service. If everything that has happened was contained in the original physical order, 'We ought then to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its antecedent state and the cause of the state that is to follow,' says Laplace in the classical statement of this position. Now this is indeed the case in a great deal of mathematics and physics, a simple example being the propositions of Euclid. But events occur which are certainly not predictable in this way, for example, the colour and other properties of chemical compounds, the behaviour of protoplasm, and so on. These effects are not mathematical resultants. Are they therefore irrational? Are they outside scientific causation? Are they merely inexplicable, observed succession—given A then B always follows? Only if we accept a purely logical notion of reason and causation.

But is this the real meaning of causation? Not at all. The more

modern theory of causation finds it not in mathematical determinism *but in all the conditions, internal and external which give rise to the effect*. This effect is not antecedently predictable, but after it has once been analysed completely into its conditions it is not merely probable, on statistical grounds, but certain, necessary. Such an effect is, of course, something quite new. It is *not* a resultant of the factors comprising the cause. It is not on the level of the assembled conditions; it is the effect of their complete synthesis into a new whole, revealing new qualities and properties. Cause thus becomes not a matter of resultants but of emergence of the new, of genuine creative evolution. Life itself is the best, though the most difficult, example. The antecedent conditions do not contain life, yet in the living organism there is nothing in the way of constituents but those which were originally non-living. The only difference is the assembly and arrangement or organization of all these non-living constituents. Such an organization is a living organism. Its cause simply *is* all the factors and conditions. If there are no more factors to discover, there is no additional cause to discern.

The vitalist who holds that an effect cannot differ from its cause but must be contained in it, and that the non-living cannot produce the living, is himself simply a mechanistic materialist with an inadequate view of matter and a limited, purely 'logical' understanding of cause and effect. In fact, he really denies causality by denying that effect can be fundamentally different from cause. It is his own inadequate view of causation which compels him to accept only two possible explanations of the emergence of something new: (*a*) the new must always have been in the antecedent conditions although it was not discernable; thus if life appears at some stage it must always have been present: and if mind appears later, it, too, must always have been present and therefore is an unseen and undiscoverable quality of *all* physical things; (*b*) the new must come from *outside* the material as an invasion or injection from another world of life and mind.

Therefore neither the mechanist nor the vitalist can explain the emergence of the new in rational terms, because their conception of what is rational, of what is 'explanation' is inadequate. What needs to be done is to revise the conception of scientific explanation until it is competent to cover creativity in nature. Creativity was not possible on the basis of the earlier view of scientific

explanation, and yet nature is one succession of novelties and is creative through and through.

Marxism has always held firmly to the theory of integrative levels and qualitative change while denying the need of vitalistic interference. Marxism is wholly at one with modern science and modern philosophy in this approach, which escapes from the dilemma by avoiding the original error of dualism, which denied the capacity for life and change to matter. Marxism finds a sufficient explanation firstly in the infinite potentialities of matter; secondly, in the self-movement of matter; thirdly, in the repatterning of matter as it seeks to adjust internal to external relations and as it develops its own various aspects in organic relation to its environment. This is sufficient to account for the evolution of all the successive and infinitely varied types of existence, including living forms, thinking animals, social types like man, and eventually of society itself.

Vitalism, however, is not only a scientific but a social heresy. It helps to reinforce that attitude to the contradictions and problems of society which places them beyond rational control. It encourages belief in the existence of unconscious urges and blind irrational forces.

An age of increasing contradictions and social paradoxes, in which poverty and plenty increase together, and want seems actually to be created by the same system that is producing wealth to an unexampled degree, in which war and economic slump descend on the peoples like natural calamities, is an age in which men will feel themselves increasingly to be the sport of forces they can neither explain nor understand.

But a vigorous attempt to find a rational solution is bound to discover economic causes for poverty, unemployment and war which are rooted in the system of class ownership and can only be finally removed by ending it. Since such a solution is unwelcome both to those who profit by the *status quo* and by those who think they might, and since the rest are economically dependent upon the ruling class and derive their ideas largely from the education and propaganda provided by it, the result will be a flat refusal of the mind even to entertain the possibility of radical reform.

It thus becomes as impossible to understand or control social phenomena as it would be electrical phenomena if we began by refusing to acknowledge the existence of electricity.

There is an obsession here which can only be explained psychologically. The urge to fly from the truth at all costs drives the mind into every kind of fantastic and supernatural explanation and resort. Hence the popularity of astrology, mysticism and every kind of superstition today.

The result of the collapse of Europe's spiritual and social order, says Drucker, is that men turn to miracle. The final defeat of reason and order was the failure first of capitalism and then of orderly liberal reform. Thereafter man is convinced that the world has no order and follows no law—the forces which govern society have become irrational, therefore miracle is the only way out and he will believe in nothing else.[1]

'The "conventional lie" of a society divided into classes assumes proportions which are all the more extensive according as the existing order of things is endangered through economic evolution and by the working of the class struggle which is the outcome of that evolution. Marx said truly that the greater the development of antagonisms between the growing forces of production and the extant social order, the more does the ideology of the ruling class become permeated with hypocrisy.'[2]

Our ancestors invented the supernatural to give them faith in a world of perils which they would not control. It was both understandable and excusable. Moreover, superstition was mingled with empirical facts of some value. It was not impossible to progress through partial and inadequate understanding to science and rationality. In our day we sin against the light. With all the achievements of science in our hands we turn back to magic. This wilful reaction is pathological and its effect mental disintegration, the cult of unreason.

Now the rational buttress of irrationalism is that form of idealism which we call vitalism, is that failure to explain change which describes it as 'statistical regularity' because law is no longer believed in.

Thus does a false ideology support a reactionary social attitude and confuse, paralyse and discourage the activity of thought in the solving of economic and political problems.

What is already a well-marked sympton of the modern mind in the English-speaking world has long been the predominant

[1] Drucker, *The End of Economic Man.*

[2] Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism.*

philosophy of both Italy and the Third Reich. On the one hand an exaggerated idealism reducing the historical world to pure, unalterable 'Idea' in which the individual holds a fixed and completely subordinate place. On the other, the repudiation of reason, and a complete surrender to primitive instinct as the short cut to reality. The more morbid forms which idealism and irrationalism, particularly in Germany, have taken, are too numerous to mention, though of great interest.[1]

Otto Spann is simply Hegel without his dialectic and without his revolutionary dynamics. Taking the capitalist system *as it is* with its false categories of the market, employer and employed, over-production, supply and demand, financial stringency, it regards these as *unalterable* laws of an unchanging whole, logical necessities in which man is for ever trapped. The world is not, as it was for Hegel, a self-changing, self-emancipating whole but a permanent condition of slavery for mankind—a static caste system, the corporative state.

Klages, the apostle of instinct, exalts animalism as fundamental life force which determines the nature of society. Every animal devours and expects to be devoured. All social theories which assume a different principle for man are beside the point. The life force in social life is that tribal spirit which completely swamps and embraces all individuals. The individual surrenders himself and his reason to the tribe and mass feeling. In getting rid of the individual we also get rid of all those awkward doctrines of the rights of man, justice, equality, humanitarianism, and democracy, which stand in the way of the privilege and absolute authority of the bosses of the Fascist state.

'Fascist thought is thus in continuous oscillation between the two poles of Vitalism and Totalitarianism. Both succeed in establishing that which is the main requirement of Fascist philosophy—the concept of a human society that would not be a relationship of persons.'[2]

It is clear that Idealism under the constraining influence of a society in disintegration in which the ruling classes are determined at all costs to resist social change does not remain a mere intellectual error which we might regard with disinterested tolerance, it becomes a powerful weapon of reaction, a mental poison which

[1] See Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West.*

[2] Karl Polanyi, *The Essence of Fascism.*

by reinforcing Fascist policies and weakening resistance to them, by inhibiting the mind against policies of rational and hopeful reconstruction, becomes a powerful ideological ally of the worst forces of corruption and self-destruction in the modern world.

And this whole philosophy of reaction in its various phases arises theoretically from an artificial dualism. 'Throughout the Universe there reigns the union of opposites which is the ground of dualism. Whenever a vicious dualism appears, it is by reason of mistaking an abstraction for a final fact.'[1] The universe is dual because each final actuality known to us is both physical and mental. But if we lose the unity in a divided universe, then out of the false dualism arises as one pole that mentalism or idealism which is the source of our modern superstitions and irrationalisms. To bring about and to encourage such illusions is the vital rôle which idealism plays in preventing human progress. Our false prophets 'suspend by their philosophies those processes of intellectual liberation by which a people is restored to sanity'.[2] 'Civilizations', says Laski, 'have perished before in history; and anyone who examines their destruction will find, I think, that one of its most fundamental causes is that superstition has taken so firm a hold upon the mind of the nation that it no longer possesses within itself the means whereby the authority of reason can effect a restoration of unity'.[3]

Since social forces work not only through economic contradictions and political conflicts but through a conflict of ideologies it is on the plane of philosophy as well as politics that the actual social struggle of our time must be fought to a finish.

[1] Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World.*
[2] Laski, *Faith, Reason and Civilization.* [3] *Ibid.*

# GLOSSARY OF PHILOSOPHICAL TERMS

**Dialectic**
Thought which is always changing, reflecting as it does the changing universe and also taking a hand in changing it.

**Dualism**
The view that there are two ultimate realities which are totally different from one another, Mind and Matter. The job is to explain how they interact.

**Idealism**
The philosophy which holds that mind existed before matter and brought it into existence, or that matter is less real than mind or that all objects for mind are themselves mental even though they may not be merely the ideas of the perceiver.

**Life**
A function of certain kinds of matter. Not a *thing*. Matter lives when it respires, reproduces, repairs itself, reacts to stimulus by behaviour, builds up its own highly complex living substance out of simpler organic materials.

**Mechanistic Materialism**
The philosophy which holds that only matter, non-living and non-thinking, exists and that it obeys only physical and chemical laws.

**Dialectical Materialism**
The philosophy which holds that matter existed before mind, that in the course of its evolution it became living and subsequently, in the brains of animals, thinking.

**Mentalism**
Sometimes called *subjective* idealism, the view (not a systematic philosophy) which holds that all we know are mental states.

**Metaphysics**
The attempt to supply the answer to the question: what is the nature of the universe, i.e. what is space, what is time, what is the mind and matter, what do we mean when we say that a thing exists.

**Vitalism**
The theory that explains life and evolution by the intrusion of a vital force into the non-living.